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TV's 'Under Siege': White House attack?

"Under Siege," a three-hour NBC movie that aired last Sunday, was the latest sign of a disturbing trend on television. Pressured by critics to reduce their political proselytizing in news and documentary programs, advocacy journalists have gone underground, tunneling into our living rooms through "entertainment."

ABC's "The Day After" and PBS's British import "Threads" slyly advocated compromise at any cost in the face of nuclear holocaust. Now comes America "Under Siege," making any official who wants to retaliate against terrorism seem like a madman.

Shi'ite commandos unleash a reign of terror in the United States, dynamiting hundreds of soldiers on a parade ground, blowing up three commercial airliners and sending a couple of rockets right through the dome of the Capitol.

In response, a righteous FBI director resists political pressure, primarily from the secretary of state, to wrongly declare the culprits Iranians, giving the military the excuse it has been looking for to bomb the britches off Ayatollah Khomeini.

The FBI ultimately captures the terrorist chieftain. The CIA, with presidential approval, assassinates him (and incidentally an innocent FBI official) in order to save America from the trauma of a long trial.

The fact that the movie was based on a series of two-year-old Washington Post articles, and that the authors of that series helped write its script, is not coincidental. The film, a mix of fact and fantasy, is a sugar-coated version of The Washington Post's view of the world, with the American president and his cabinet mostly unprincipled knuckleheads and the terrorists Islamic Rambos, grinning as they gladly die for lofty ideals.

Make no mistake. More than a discussion of "what's going to happen if terrorism comes to America" (the program's executive producer Don Ohlmeyer), the film was a thinly disguised political attack on the policies and personalities of the current administration.

Actor E.G. Marshall, as the secretary of state determined to retaliate against Iran even after he learned the Iranians were blameless, was playing George Shultz.

"I'd like to blame Shultz for most of the bad dialogue," Christian Williams told reporters in a Los Angeles press conference held to hype the show last month.

Mr. Williams was one of three Washington Post writers — Bob Woodward and Richard Harwood were the others — who researched the Post series on terrorism and participated in writing this screenplay.

"If you get George Shultz's speeches over the last two years about what to do against terrorists," added Bob Woodward, "you will find that in the public speeches."

Who is the secretary of defense (played by Paul Winfield) supposed to be depicting?

"We all know there's no military solution to terrorism," he says, sounding suspiciously like Caspar Weinberger.

The model for the good-guy FBI director, played by Peter Strauss, was "to a certain extent . . . the current FBI director (William Webster)," Mr. Woodward added, ". . . oddly playing the role of Daniel Ellsberg."

Abu Ladeen is the terrorist leader; his last name is "Nidal" backwards. In real life, Abu Nidal allegedly was the brain behind the Vienna and Rome airport massacres.

So it doesn't take a genius to figure out that the man who sits outside the president's door, barring entry to the heroic FBI director and politicking in favor of the CIA assassination plot, is Donald Regan, or that the occupant of the Oval Office, prepared to compromise the U.S. Constitution for a political purpose, is Ronald Reagan.

Mr. Woodward went a long way toward dispelling any doubts about which president he was depicting when he reminded reporters that he recently had written a story for the Post "disclosing that Ronald Reagan had signed off on a presidential finding dispatching the CIA to train people in Lebanon . . . to conduct pre-emptive strikes on terrorists . . ."

What kind of man is the president in the film?

"You did not have the right to execute those men [the terrorist leader and the FBI agent protecting him]," the film's FBI director tells the president after he discovers the plot. "What you did makes us no different than them."

"We're both part of this administration," the president replies. "You did your job, now let me do mine."

The terrorists are willing to die for their principles, while all the president's men are playing politics.

The FBI director marches straight into the office of the editor of a Washington Newspaper. "You want a story?" he says, tossing a file on the editor's (Ben Bradlee's?) desk. "There it is."

("... We have portrayed in the movie a perhaps self-serving portrait of the beleaguered newspaper editor who is trying to get the story," Mr. Woodward admitted.)

Why were the president and some of his colleagues so anxious to avoid putting the terrorist chief on public trial?

Putting people on trial, Christian Williams told reporters, might mean suffering "through what would really be a divisive debate Because," Mr. Williams added, "if you get right down to it, we are not without sin."

The implication is one that permeated the film: Ultimately, the responsibility for terrorism lies in our own laps — virtually every terrorist in the film is avenging a loved one murdered by some regime we once called an ally.

"All they need is the will and a few dollars, and they can really muck things up," said Mr. Ohlmeyer.

Unfortunately, Mr. Ohlmeyer was talking about terrorists, not television.

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